

SOLOMON EAGLE LASKI

A Review of "Communism" by a Communist.

IT is written that while the Great Plague raged a portentous figure stalked stark naked through the streets of London. This was, it appeared, no less than a prophet—one Solomon Eagle—calling upon all hearers to repent, to cast aside the sinful lusts of the flesh (including their garments) and to join him in prayer to avert the imminent and awful wrath of God.

Professor Laski* does not, it it true, cast aside any garments—since we cannot dignify by that title the fig-leaves of self-righteous complacency with which your mere MacDonalдите shelters himself from the charge of "Communism." These Laski tosses from him with more than contempt.

Not for him is salvation to be found in pious adoration of "constitutional procedure." "Inevitable gradualness" gives him small peace, and the bald antitheses of Democracy *versus* Dictatorship, and Parliamentary Rectitude *versus* Sinful Violence leave him as it found him.

He admits, even to the beating of the breast, that the Communists have a case, and a coherent one. Hence his tears; for—as must be obvious to every cultivated person—Communism cannot possibly be right, since even a plain man can understand it . . .

Solomon Eagle rushed naked into the streets with a torch to cry, above the groanings of the stricken, into the ears of the terrified a warning that the End of All Things was at hand. Professor Laski, too respectable to strip, too sophisticated to rush, and too academically discreet to express himself quite so categorically as all that, none the less comes substantially to the same conclusion.

With, of course, a qualifying proviso—that the calamity may be averted by the proper authorities if only they will adopt a correct procedure (details of which may be had on application to Professor Laski after office hours).

Professor Laski's method, while not entirely original, is borrowed from a thoroughly respectable exemplar.

Among the most enjoyable by-products of the Socialist Revival of the 1880's was a novel by an American Catholic Priest, a most diverting spirit, Ignatius Donnelly. In this novel he depicts the culmination of the revolutionary proletarian class struggle, then forcing itself into general notice.

Bellamy had done much the same in his *Looking Backward* and its sequel, *Equality*. Morris did it, too, in his *News from Nowhere*. Others had done it and were to do it, notably Jack London in *The*

* *Communism*, by Harold J. Laski (Home University Library; Williams and Norgate, 2s. net).

Iron Heel. But these were all works by Socialists to show the possibility and desirability of Socialism.

Father Donnelly countered them in his *Cæsar's Column*, in which the revolution takes place all right (and is so far proved to be possible), but ends in failure because, the priests being driven out and the Church dethroned, there was no power left to prevent the heart of man becoming "deceitful above all things and desperately wicked."

With the superior intelligentsia substituted for the Church and Eccleston Square in the place of the Pope, this becomes the (implied) Gospel according to Professor Laski. He does not detail a case against capitalism; he takes so much for granted. He implies that it is capable of permanent prolongation, but at the same time he has no doubt that it is a thoroughly and increasingly abominable system, one constantly provoking the proletarians to do things which a really right-minded person could not approve but must condone.

Moreover, the Marxian-Communist view of history is "as a general doctrine undeniable"; its concept of class-struggle is (to the shame of the uncultivated bourgeoisie) "in broad outline . . . unanswerable"; its theory of the State "has so much of justice on its side that the proof of its wrongness lies, above all, in the demonstration that its ideals can be realised by alternative means."

In a word the Communists are much more right than they have any right to be, and unless they are headed off will do an intolerable deal of mischief by reason of their natural proletarian incompetence defeating a morally justifiable cause.

It is not to the purpose to note that this is the traditional dogma of the Fabian intellectual. The real point is that it begs the whole question in exactly the way it was begged by Ignatius Donnelly.

No Communist living or dead ever chose to work for bloody revolution in preference to other and equally available alternatives. The Communist case is that in real life the alternatives available in theory are one by one eliminated until a revolutionary crisis becomes inescapable—and should therefore be prepared for.

The Communist does not say that the victory of the proletariat is guaranteed in advance; or that the day after that victory the New Era will emerge (like Athene from the brain of Zeus) fully grown, clothed and armed. On the contrary, the whole thought of Marx, of Lenin, and of the Communist International turns upon the point that only after prolonged struggles, and many defeats, will the proletariat be consolidated sufficiently to take full advantage of the ever-recurring and intensifying social-crises.

This fact renders worthless all homilies such as these which Professor Laski has bobbed, shingled, and brought up to date. It is a waste of words and patience to tell us through whole chapters

that the actual revolutionary conquest of power will be a big and a dangerous job, and one virtually impossible if the armed forces of the State remain loyal to the capitalist hierarchy. Any Communist would have told Professor Laski so much and more ; he would go on to show that the whole of Communist strategy and tactics is built upon just this very fact.

It helps nothing (except to pacify old women of both sexes) to raise conundrums about the food supply in Britain three weeks after the revolution. Such questions envisage the whole problem in a false perspective. They conceive the Communist revolution "secretly" armed and prepared suddenly smuggled on to the stage of history, in complete contradiction to its normal course and process. They are thus as much Utopian and Romantic as the imaginary conceptions they are designed to refute.

Professor Laski in fact tries to deny the Communists in practice what he concedes them in theory—a knowledge and understanding of the historic process.

It is there that the crux of the matter lies, and there for the time we must leave the argument. Professor Laski is driven to a half-hearted and involved attempt to refute the whole Marxian economics. He concedes the "general truth" of the method by which the conclusion is reached (that capitalism can only escape from one crisis by preparing the grounds for one still more drastic), but he boggles at the conclusion itself. It is "too simple" !

At bottom that is the chief grievance the "intellectual" has with every proletarianism—it lacks "complexity." Your intellectual suffers from the complex-complex to a high degree. Of the proletariat, with its love for the simple and straightforward, he has a great and real fear. The bourgeoisie, it is true, has not treated these, its academic high priests, any too well ; but the proletariat, they fear, would deal with them considerably worse.

Out of the desire to avoid the admitted difficulties and dangers of a proletarian revolution is born the will to believe in a possible road of escape. And when the proletarian revolutionary retorts that any attempt at "re-forming" that which from its nature can only be re-formed by revolution is playing into the hands of Reaction—the intellectual is confirmed in his suspicions and retires to compose sermons on the bad manners of the Bolsheviks.

The Communist challenge has yet to be met. Is there conceivably any available and stable compromise between the alternatives of capitalist and proletarian dictatorship? Professor Laski, full of a sense of the utter inadequacy of the proletariat for any high "constructive" purpose, shudders at both. He can only turn to faith and trust that capitalism will repent in time and cease to drive the proletariat to attempt extreme measures.

There are no plague-carts at the door (as yet) and no voices crying out, "Bring out your dead." Yet the sense of imminent and awful doom is as strong upon Professor Laski as upon Solomon Eagle. The Professor does not cry, "Woe ! woe !" but he does (what comes to the same thing) warn the capitalist class and his fellow intellectuals that the present system cannot continue without change and that the grievances that make men Communists must be removed or the worst may befall.

And for that, I suppose, remembering his rank and dignity, we ought to be truly grateful to Professor Laski.

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